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Nation Building in Contemporary Germany: The Strange Conversion of Hitler's 'Word Made of Stone'

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the contending redefinitions of national identity in contemporary Germany's memorial culture, focussing particularly on the ensemble of monuments and parade fields known as the former Nazi Party rally grounds in Nuremberg. In a detailed case study, I analyse the recent conversion of one of the physical remnants of National Socialism – Albert Speer's transformer station – into a fast-food restaurant, and interpret this conversion as a novel contribution to the discourse on German nationhood. I argue that the provocative commercial reutilization of the former Nazi monument gives expression to a renewed self-confidence that Germany has gained from displaying a willingness to face up to its past as perpetrator nation. While the intervention thus deviates from the self-indicting spirit that had been characteristic for Germany's memorial culture after World War II, an ironic note is conspicuous in this act of commemorative politics that indicates a way of dealing with the fascist legacy that is, surprisingly in some respects, superior to more conventional memory strategies.

KEY WORDS: national identity, memorial culture, commemorative politics, Germany, National Socialism.

WORD COUNT: 9015

Introduction

In July 2006 the transformer station on the former Nazi Party rally grounds in Nuremberg took on a new look. The grey façade of the fascist monument was supplemented with colourful neon-lights, chairs and tables were placed on the forecourt, the doors of the building stood open with people moving in and out, laughing and consuming meals of questionable nutritional quality. A multinational company had turned the building, which was originally supposed to transmit Hitler's national-socialist message by architectural means, into a fast-food restaurant. Given that Germans today renegotiate their national identity to a considerable extent by placing post-World War II Germany in opposition to the Third Reich, the case constitutes an interesting act of commemorative politics. However, the literature on the construction of national identity in Germany has so far not paid attention to this architectural event.

Apart from the fact that the conversion was a fairly recent event, three factors may have kept scholars from analysing the case. All three relate to the general plausibility of interpreting the unusual alterations that have been made to the erstwhile transformer station in terms of an intervention in the political process of reconstructing German national identity. Firstly, theorists of space disagree about the role that material culture plays in today's political discourse. While some scholars make the case for a 'spatial turn' in the social sciences and the humanities (Gregory and Urry 1985, Schlögel 2003, Warf and Arias 2009), others argue that ideology and political argument, once actually embodied in the constructed environment, are nowadays almost exclusively communicated through the written word and oral speech (Tuan 2008: 113-15). Secondly, many of those theories that reaffirm the political significance of space production would, if they were applied to the present case, seem to suggest that the conversion of the transformer station into a fast-food restaurant is just another example of the increasing standardization of urban landscapes

under economic globalization (Kogl 2008, cf. Smethurst 2000). Tellingly, one theory characterizes practices of global homogenization by using the term 'McDonaldization' (Ritzer 2008). At best, then, the national significance of the 2006 event is merely negative, namely in its capacity to catalyse de-nationalization, in the sense that another historical monument seems to have been withdrawn from national consciousness. Thirdly, at least one prominent expert in the field doubts that memorial heritage is a relevant factor for the reconstruction of national identity in the particular context of contemporary Germany (Fulbrook 1999: 47).

The de-nationalization thesis can be ruled out once the case of the transformer station is examined by retaining a degree of sensibility towards the multiplicity of semiotic relations that historical spaces may condense into one particular locus (Massey 1993: 66). We will see that the erstwhile transformer station has not been converted into a perfect clone of all other fast-food chain outlets in the world. Instead of merely fostering economic globalization, the Burger King restaurant adds another layer of meaning to the building, thus creating an architectural creole that 'comments' on the Nazi remnant and openly speaks to the participants in the discourse on German national identity. The other factors mentioned above concerning the relative importance of textual resources provide a challenge that could plausibly be answered only by a more comprehensive empirical investigation. Therefore, I shall be agnostic with regard to these points, although there are reasonable arguments supporting the claim that meaning is still conveyed through the constructed environment, and that this is particularly so in regard to the reconstruction of German national identity (Niven and Paver 2010: 1, Riera 2007, Tomberger 2010: 224, Young 1992: 268-9). However, even if non-verbal heritage practices are not able to influence political discourses to the same extent as verbal heritage practices (such as storytelling and public speeches), analysing the case still helps us to reconstruct the discursive field and systematize the ideological positions that aim at forging the German

nation today. Thus, I will argue that the case should be seen in the light of current efforts to overcome the self-indicting memorial culture that had been dominant in post-World War II Germany since the late 1960s. Instead of embodying the message that National Socialism 'must never happen again', the modified transformer station tells the story of a nation whose willingness to face up to its cruel past is beyond doubt. Whereas before the Nazi remnant were kept to bear witness to the past and act as a warning for the present, it now witnesses to the nation's self-purification and serves Germany's 'moral rearmament' (Moeller 2003: 31). Furthermore, the case prompts important questions about how to best offer resistance to the meaning and agency of the material heritage of National Socialism.

In the first section, I briefly review the literature on the construction of national identity, focussing especially on German nationhood and non-verbal efforts to 'forge' the nation. In the second section, I introduce readers to the case of the transformer station on the former Nazi Party rally grounds in Nuremberg. Next, the specific political message of the case is analysed against the backdrop of the contested discourse on German national identity. In the last section, I consider the case independently of its specific political significance and argue that the 'profane' commercial reutilization of fascist material heritage, characterized by the transformer station-turned-Burger King, might actually be a constructive addition to the currently existing (counter-)monumental culture in Germany.

National Identity and Memorial Culture in Post-World War II Germany

National identities give individuals a sense of belonging, instill in them a sense of mutual solidarity, and mobilize them for concerted action. They carve out their respective particularity by drawing upon facts such as language, religion, ethnicity, historical events, culture, and political institutions. However, neither any single fact, nor any combination of

facts, constitutes the essence of national identities. This is because national identities, like the facts upon which they draw, are historically emerging and changing constructs. Even the ethnicity of a nation can hardly be said to be determined by an ethnic core, and those ethnic characteristics that might be identified are likely to be supplemented with narratives of a common descent (Anderson 1993, Gellner 1993, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Renan 1939, Weber 1948; for an account that tends slightly more towards an essentialist understanding of national identity, see Smith 2005: esp. p. 11). To a large extent contemporary scholarship agrees about the constructed nature of national identities. However, scholars are divided on the issue of how the phenomenon of national identities came into existence and which, if any, substantive characteristics channel the process of their reinvention. While disagreement in detail should not be overlooked, for the present purposes we can proceed from the largely shared expectation that a particular national identity – because and insofar as it is a historically emergent construct – is the subject of an on-going process of identity formation and reformation. The question of 'Who are we?' is therefore permanently re-negotiated by people that feel themselves to be part of the collective, and counter-balanced by the question of 'Who are they?' by those that do not share the same allegiance. Factors such as language and ethnicity may or may not set the terms of discourse. However, historical consciousness always plays a central role because shared beliefs in a common past make history emerge as a legacy for the present that indicates the contours of a common fate. By drawing on the power of the past, people are brought into supposedly old or supposedly new forms of sociality (Fairclough et al. 2008, Fulbrook 1999: 17). And as different answers may be given as to what this common past actually is and through which parts of the material and intangible heritage the common past is preserved, the on-going process of national identity formation and reformation can be understood as a contested discourse.

A rich diversity of textual sources feed this discourse. While most scholarship on national identity – in this journal and elsewhere in the field of nationalism studies – has focused on written and oral sources, it has also been noticed that interventions into discourses on national identity are being made through non-verbal sources. Apart from public speeches, history textbooks, and oral narratives, material heritage in particular may also have 'an identity-conferring status' (McLean 2006: 3, Simon and Ashley 2010: 247, Urry 1996: 61). Territories, landscapes, and urban architecture become a part of the collective consciousness of a people, embodying and transmitting socially constructed meaning. Buildings like churches and monuments, but also seemingly empty squares, differentiate space and emerge as sacred places or sites of otherwise heightened significance (Smith 2005). Being associated with the deeds of great men and women but also the daily round of ordinary people, such places provide 'mnemonic clues' (Kogl 2008: 14) to a shared past. They remind us of who we are, and offer sets of prescriptions and proscriptions to remind us of how we ought to behave. In addition to the hierarchy of values that places communicate, sometimes the organization of the physical environment literally makes room for some kinds of activity while leaving no space for others. Hence, features of the physical environment are not just empty vessels that might or might not contain events. Rather, they are culturally superimposed constructions; they are active, expressive, and power-laden – they are, as it were, events themselves. Therefore, the spatializing practices by which those places that shape the collective consciousness of a people are shaped themselves – i.e. built, erased, or transformed – potentially influence processes of national identity reconstruction.

In Germany, the mutual enmeshing of the material environment and social life has been somewhat special since 1945 (Fulbrook 1999: 25-47, Gregor 2008, Macdonald 2009: 8-13, Niven and Paver 2010, Young 1992). While parts of the population still hoped to rehabilitate the German nation in the aftermath of World War II by reasserting traditions

from pre-fascist times, German memorial culture found itself in a quandary: Firstly, most historical traditions were manifestly discredited (e.g. Prussian militarism) or under suspicion of having been accessories to what had happened (e.g. German idealism). Secondly, other traditional sources of nationalism could not be reclaimed either. The new state could not tell the story of a glorious victory over evil enemies and recall the martyrdom of those who gave their lives so that the nation could live. Instead, Germany had to exercise restraint in expressing national pride and enmities. Thirdly, it was confronted with the undesirable, but also indelible, heritage of National Socialism, which one could not simply forget, but had to come to terms with. Thus, German memorial culture could not easily fulfil what David Miller regards as an essential feature of national identity, namely that national identity 'embodies historical continuity' (Miller 2000: 28). Instead, the state was compelled to stress the discontinuity with its own past to regain legitimacy, even if sometimes this meant only to portray the Third Reich as a terrible accident that had happened to the German people. At any rate, to a considerable extent post-World War II Germany re-established its 'self' through temporal differentiation by positing Nazi Germany as its 'other'.

To some extent, of course, processes of identity reconstruction can always be characterized through apothetic descriptions of what they are not. The 'other', according to post-structuralism after all, is not just something 'else', something that is unrelated and marginal. Rather, it is decisive and constitutive; the 'other', in the words of Henry Staten (1986: 16), is the 'constitutive outside' of the 'self'. 'Self' and 'other' are both formed in a contested process of continuous, relationally dependent, reconstruction. However, in post-World War II Germany the construction of identity against an outside exhibits itself in particularly unambiguous terms: The 'othering' of National Socialism had been the *leitmotif* of memorial culture in both the German Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic, even though it is also true that the 'othering' was undertaken in

different ways in East and West Germany (Fulbrook 1999: 28-35, Herf 1997, Niven 2002: 39-59, Reichel 1999). Moreover, the legacy of fascism has also been the crucial point of reference since reunification in 1990. The articulation of German identity – together with its implications for the questions of who or what one is struggling against, why, and by what means – is still dependent upon, and to a large extent accomplished by, the demarcating projection of National Socialism.

The Transformer Station on the Former Nazi Party Rally Grounds

In the memorial culture of post-World War II Germany, the rejection of National Socialism is attempted via two different kinds of memorials: Entirely new memorials and the remnants of Nazi architecture. On the one hand, new memorials were set up to recall the rise of National Socialism (e.g. the commemorative plaque on Königsplatz, Munich), its victims (e.g. monuments erected in Nuremberg on the sites of destroyed synagogues), or anti-fascist resistance (German Resistance Memorial Center, Berlin). On the other hand, the physical remnants of the fascist past, such as concentration camps and representative buildings of National Socialism, have become the object of memorialization. To systematically classify the new memorials and remnants, it has been suggested to differentiate between memorial sites, perpetrator sites, and sites of National-Socialist self-representation (Piper 2003: 193, Urban 2010: 103). This distinction provides a basic analytical grid to evaluate memorialization efforts. However, it assumes that memorialization could be adequate by virtue of doing justice to the history of the respective sites. Yet many historical sites and events can be associated with both victims and perpetrators, with passive political opportunists and sometimes also resistance fighters, and the presence or absence of which group of people should be memorized is not always a

matter of factual accuracy. For the present analysis I therefore suggest that memorialization entails a necessarily political dimension by which the memorializing agents reassign meaning to historical sites and establish interpretational sovereignty. The crucial question accordingly is not whether Germany's memorial culture opposes the National Socialist past in the respective sites, but how.

The Nazi Party rally grounds in Nuremberg constitute a particularly prominent and imposing example of fascist megalomania that calls for memorialization. The annual propaganda event of the NSDAP was held here in 1927, 1929, and from 1933 onwards. To facilitate mobilization of the masses and demonstrate the power of the regime, the area of the rally grounds stretched for about seven square miles and consisted of sixteen major sites. While some construction projects were never actually finished (e.g. the German Stadium, which was supposed to host 405.000 spectators), most representative buildings, parade fields, deployment areas, and convention centres largely escaped the air raids during the war. The transformer station is a part of the Nazi Party rally grounds that was finished, used, and survived the air raids. Completed in 1936, the transformer station hosted the generators that provided the electricity for the propaganda events. Notably, the generators supplied the electricity for the 130 searchlights that turned the Zeppelin Field into a cathedral of light, and the Zeppelin Grandstand (from which Hitler spoke and which was fashioned after the Pergamon Altar) into a proper 'altar'. The building was already full of symbolism because of this function. In addition, Albert Speer designed the transformer station in a style that corresponds to the other representative buildings of the rally grounds. In accordance with the basic thought guiding Nazi architecture, constructions would serve both a functional and a larger purpose. On the one hand, the buildings and complexes of the Nazi Party rally grounds would set the stage for propaganda, while on the other hand, they would be propaganda themselves (Dietzfelbinger and Liedtke 2004: 62, Doosry 2002: 138). The 'violation of human scale' (Speer 1995: 204) of the urban neo-classical granite

buildings should communicate the rigidity of the *Führer's* will, overawe the spectator, and instil in each German a sense of the insignificance of the individual. (The corresponding verbal expression was the rally slogan: 'You are nothing, your people are everything'.) Speer, the ingenious official architect of the Third Reich, had no doubts about the symbolic potency of the colossal buildings (Speer 1995) and Hitler, the would-be artist, enthusiastically agreed with Speer. In fact, Hitler was convinced that the ideological message of his regime was most efficiently imparted through architecture. The message transmitted by material forms of expression, he lectured, is 'more compelling than the spoken word. It is the word made of stone'. As such it should 'speak as eternal witness' (Hitler quoted from Weihsmann 1998: 19 and Reither 2000: 6).

Here about Picture 1

Transformer station, Nazi Party rally grounds (1936).

Photo by courtesy of Stadtarchiv Nürnberg.

After the war, the transformer station was neither torn down nor significantly altered. Until it was sold in 2006 it was the property of the public energy company N-Ergie, and sporadically used for storage (Möller 2006a). In the main, however, it served as a warning monument (*Mahnmal*), with this status officially given in 1973. A new Bavarian state law declared the buildings on the Nazi Party rally grounds, including the transformer station, to be worthy of preservation for their significance as 'witnesses to the past' (Macdonald 2006b: 17). Set slightly apart from the main Third Reich sites in Nuremberg, the transformer station was perhaps not a central element in the historical consciousness of foreign visitors. Yet, for locals it always had an eerie presence because it preserves the

memory of the Nazi past in a unique way. Although the allies had removed all the National Socialist emblems from buildings in 1945, the Nazi symbolism can still be clearly identified at the transformer station: the black shadow of a stone imperial eagle holding the swastika in its claws stands out clearly against the granite. In 2006, N-Ergie sold the building to an investor that opened a Burger King restaurant in the building. Communal construction regulations complicated the architectural conversion of the historic building, yet a sufficient number of signs and architectural features specific to the company were eventually integrated into the façade and the forecourt of the transformer station. Thus, the outward appearance at least to some extent could be conciliated with the standard corporate design that is implemented all over the world. The standardization of the interior was unproblematic.

Here about Picture 2

The erstwhile transformer station turned into a Burger King restaurant in 2006.

Photo by author, 2011.

There are a number of theories which, if applied to this case, would suggest that the alterations do not constitute a novel contribution to the discourse on German identity. The architecture of the fast-food industry is frequently viewed as a paradigmatic example of the spatial dynamics of late modernity, by which the particularity of places is 'ironed out' and the world becomes increasingly 'flat'. Paul Smethurst (2000: 33, 40, 56–7) accordingly refers to McDonald's restaurants to illustrate what theorists of space have in mind when they speak of the diffusion of 'utterly uniform "pseudo places"' and 'economically-driven placelessness', or the 'homogenisation of space under global capitalism'. For Kogl (2008:

31 n. 35), Burger King outlets are typical examples of 'abstract space', which are not proper places at all:

> Unlike spaces that ring with a tumult of meanings, expressed in everything from a whisper to a shout, late modern, capitalist spaces seem not to express meaning at all. They seem to be merely rational, practical, and functional. They do not speak of the glory of God, as a cathedral does, or of the actual routes taken by real people, as a dirt footpath does, or of a nation's history and political ideals, as a monument does. They do not seem to speak at all. (Kogl 2008: 14)

George Ritzer (2008: 48, 170) sees in McDonald's and Burger King restaurants sites that are 'centrally conceived', 'devoid of distinctive substantive content', and 'lack a sense of history'; places that are, as he puts it strongly, 'nothing'. Moreover, in Ritzer's work fast-food chains stand for a much broader trend in late modernity. The 'McDonaldization of society' is his label for the 'process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant [efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control] are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world' (Ritzer 2008: 1). Though denoting a broader societal trend, it goes without saying that the McDonaldization thesis applies to the production of space more specifically. In this sense, Douglas Kellner affirms that 'The McDonald's environment is a sterile and dehumanizing site of standardized and banal architecture signifying sameness, corporate homogeneity, and artificial massified space' (Kellner 1998: ix). Indeed, Roger Lewis (2002) speaks explicitly of the 'McDonaldization of architecture'.

Considered in the light of these theories, the conversion of the transformer station in 2006 might still be considered relevant to the reconstruction of German nationality; the conversion could be interpreted as actually removing a source of historical information. Rather than a contribution to redefine German nationhood, however, the intervention then

would aim at economicization and de-nationalization. A number of local commentators take this view. According to Hans-Christian Täubrich, Head of the Documentation Centre of the Nazi Party Rallies Ground, this is an unprecedented case of a 'Nazi-building being turned into a purely commercial site' (Täubrich quoted from Möller 2006a). Christof Popp, who had been commissioned to design a set of information boards on the Nazi Party rally grounds in the run-up to the 2006 FIFA World Cup together with the architect Xiaotian Li, was 'shocked' to find that the historical building was re-used as if it were an empty shell (Popp quoted from Möller 2006d). City councillor Joachim Thiel similarly claims on his website that the conversion of the transformer station has deprived a historical site of its national significance and amounts to the 'historically insensitive trivialization' of National Socialism (Thiel n.d.; for similar statements see also Heyer 2006 and Möller 2006c). The economization thesis also seems to be corroborated by the statements of the actors actively involved in the conversion process. Herbert Dombrowsky, member of the executive board of N-Ergie, pointed out that his company had decided to sell the transformer station to the investor with the highest bid because they did not consider the building to be a site of National-Socialist self-representation (Möller 2006a). The winning investor (CT Projektentwicklungsgesellschaft Bochum) stated that the management had acted out of economic interest (Möller 2006e), and declined my request to comment further on the delicate issue just as the chief executives and branch manager of Burger King. More surprisingly, the municipal authorities apparently did not have historical qualms. The building directorate of the city of Nuremberg raised no objections to the project apart from imposing building regulations, and made its decision without conferring with other (and arguably more cautious) parties such as the mayor or the advisory board to the city council, which in 2004 had been explicitly established for the purpose of deliberating issues concerning the preservation of the Nazi Party rally grounds as 'witnesses to the past' (Möller 2006a).

Quite obviously, the actors involved were more concerned with making business than commemorative politics. However, this does neither mean that the actors were unaware that the conversion of the building would shape memorial culture, nor that the transformer station-turned-Burger King undermined the historical site's symbolic potency in the context of the German material culture of remembrance in the eyes of others. Deliberations about the historical legacy of the building already must have taken place amongst the decision makers of Burger King, given that the restaurant staff are advised to refer customers to the information board some twenty metres in front of the building, if asked about the site's history. And while the employees carry out this instruction, some of them are happy to give their assessment of the conversion privately. Two employees thus argued independently of each other that the conversion constitutes a win-win situation: The historical legacy makes the Burger King special and the Burger King draws attention to the historical legacy. It is very likely that their bosses have factored in the history of the site, too, since they cannot reasonably have expected to generate positive publicity. Entrepreneurs may plausibly hope to shore up a fast-food chain's reputation by setting up outlets in prestigious historical structures (e.g. in Oxford, a half-timbered residence that dates back to the 15th century has been rented out by Jesus College to a Pret A Manger, making it a somewhat posh sandwich bar); but it is rather unlikely that a structure that is unmistakably National Socialist in origin, and which had helped turn Hitler's inflammatory speeches into moments of messianic epiphany, could have the same effect. Tellingly, bloggers soon established connections between the swastika and Burger King's logo as 'two symbols of imperialism', and the derisive nickname 'Hitler King' took root among locals. Hence, while the move to integrate a Burger King restaurant in the erstwhile transformer station certainly undermined much of the building's symbolic potency as a 'witness to the past', it would be hasty to confirm that it undermined the building's symbolic potency as such. In the next section, I therefore consider alternative

interpretations of the meaning that the conversion of the erstwhile transformer station has taken in the context of contending redefinitions of national identity in contemporary Germany's memorial culture.

Competing Reconstructions of National Identity in Post-War Germany

Expressing the desire to build a new and just nation on the bedrock of horrendous crime, and aiming at objectifying this claim, an *anti-fascist* material culture of remembrance emerged in post-World War II Germany that revolved around self-criticism and self-indictment (Lübbe 1983, Rüsen 2005: 200-1). The declaration of Nazi buildings as 'witnesses to the past' can be taken as the central discursive frame of this memorialization strategy. Nazi buildings are kept to warn people of fascist megalomania, even though mostly as torsos, in parts even rendered as such through symbolic amputation, as a 'performative statement of German willingness to recognize the past and to learn from it' (Macdonald 2006b: 23). A case in point is the 360-metre long Zeppelin building on the Nazi Party rally grounds. Although the side galleries were removed in 1967 (the big stone swastika on top of the Grandstand had already been blown up by the US Army in 1945), the overall structure of the Zeppelin Grandstand is being preserved to remind spectators of the 'fascination and terror' of National Socialism. The transformer station, as already mentioned, was also declared a 'witness to the past' in 1973, and its official status has not changed since. The modification of the appearance and function of the building carried out in 2006, however, altered the message of the building *de facto*.

At first glance, the conversion into a fast-food restaurant appears to be coherent with a second memorial tradition that was primarily popular in the first two decades of the Federal Republic. This tradition did not proclaim a German identity that opposes itself by

expressing the desire to bear the stigma of the past and assume responsibility. Instead, the idea was to employ the methodology of a sober-minded functionalism that allowed for the overcoming of National Socialism both as a factual reality and as a real memory (Frei 1999, Gregor 2003a, Moeller 2003: 15-19). The aspiration was de-Nazification or, to employ a term that was frequently invoked in Nuremberg City Council discussions in the late 1950s, 'amortization' (Macdonald 2006b: 25 n. 29). Instead of integrating former Nazi buildings into a chastening landscape of warning monuments, the strategy was to use them for merely 'practical' purposes – for instance, storage – or raze them to the ground (Macdonald 2006a: 115–16, 2006b: 18–22, Niven and Paver 2010: 2–3).

In a way, this *non-ideological* position (non-ideological, because it claims to be 'above' nationalism and ideology) actually aims at the conversion of concrete places into abstract space. Nevertheless, this strategy acquires some plausibility in the context of the legacy of fascism. Advocates of the anti-fascist stance – especially the German student movement – frequently invoked psychoanalytical categories to delegitimize the non-ideological stance as a pathological inclination to repress an uncomfortable past. Affirming this interpretation, scholars speak of an 'inability to come to terms with the past' or 'strategic amnesia' (Large 2001: 438). However, while the effacement of National Socialist monuments certainly permitted a distancing of Germans from any sense of having been accomplices of the Third Reich, it is not simple effacement but ambiguous negation, and as such has a justifiable place in the politics of memory and heritage. It is certainly true that the non-ideological stance denies National Socialism; it does not stage the past as present. But more precisely, it denies the Nazi past a positive place in the German identity. National Socialism is retained as absence, retained as that for which there is no room, either materially or symbolically. Why should it be ethically uncontroversial, after all, to allow the historical legacy of National Socialism to become economically burdensome? Why should scarce public funds be expended for the restoration of megalomaniacal buildings

rather than for the payment of reparations to the victims of National Socialism or for economic development and public education? Furthermore, the deliberate preservation of the historical remnants additionally risks generating positive rather than oppositional identifications with National Socialism. Similarly, restoring buildings to their original shape tends to signal their extraordinary value, given that 'museumification' invokes a feeling of astonishment and wonder (Greenblatt 2006). Thus, Arno Hamburger, Chairman of the Jewish Religious Community in Nuremberg, has questioned whether preserving the decommissioned transformer station as a witness to the past instead of turning it into a fast-food restaurant would have been the better choice, as the former option would necessarily mean memorializing Speer's achievements (Möller 2006a).

Another alternative option, that of surrendering buildings to the ravages of time, is also problematic. In his apologetic monograph, *Inside the Third Reich*, Speer wrote that the decay of the monuments was factored into the architectural model of the Nazi Party rally grounds. Slow decay, Speer theorized, adds to the consecration and mythologization of monuments, and generates an emotive response of awe and sympathy. The German mentality, he suggested moreover, is especially sensible to the allure of the ruin (Speer 1995: 97). Reports by the Nuremberg City Council's discussions bear testimony to the awareness of Speer's 'Theory of Ruin Value'. The view was expressed that:

> Once fallen into ruin, the Congress Hall and the Zeppelin Building would come to look even more like the now-ruined classical forebears on which they were modelled [the Colosseum and the Pergamon Altar]. Rather than diminishing their ability to speak, this would only add to their allure and it would bear proper testimony to the achievements of the Third Reich. (Macdonald 2006b: 17)

Turned into a Burger King restaurant, the transformer station is neither preserved as a warning memorial, nor is it left to decay. It also fails to conform to the non-ideological

stance. The Nazi monument was not torn down, and the reconstruction work has not obliterated the entire original symbolic texture. Furthermore, the particular practical economic use to which the building is put might be seen as expressing a certain continuity with National Socialism rather than viewed in a context of non-ideological discontinuity. The holocaust, or so Ritzer (2008: 27) claims, is a preliminary stage to McDonaldization ('mass-produced death'). However, the discourse on German identity has other memorial traditions to offer with which the 2006 conversion of the transformer station could be associated.

Although the anti-fascist stance had been dominant since the late 1960s (Moeller 2003: 15), the discourse over the reconstruction of post-World War II Germany's identity by 'othering' its National Socialist past was only temporarily settled, not lastingly resolved. In fact, new conflicts emerged in the late 1980s. Historians report a new phase of 'memory contests' concerning the memorialization of National Socialism (Gregor 2003b: 590-4, Niven and Paver 2010: 4–8, Young 1992: 271). The reunification process of the two new Germanies invigorated the question of 'which kind of memory to preserve, how to do it, in whose name, and to what end' (Young 1992: 270). The continuation of the conflict concerning the German 'self' reaffirms the finding that commemorative politics can resort to a multiplicity of strategies to renegotiate national identity even if the cultural heritage to be memorized is not a source of pride but an undesired legacy. In particular a memorialization strategy has found expression in material culture in the aftermath of German reunification that showcases the 'othering' of National Socialism while simultaneously challenging the perpetuation of national shame. It is fuelled by a distinct feeling amongst many Germans that the National Socialist past unduly burdens post-World War II Germany. Ventilating this grievance, the recipient of the 1998 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, Martin Walser, complained that reference to Auschwitz was frequently used in politics on the domestic and the international level as a 'moral cudgel' to

beat the lesson 'Do not forget!' into Germans' consciousness and hinder their pursuit of national interests. The National Socialist legacy, he sensed, had become the means to the 'exploitation of our disgrace for present purposes' (Walser 1998).

The memorial culture arising from this feeling can be described in terms of a slightly neo-nationalist attitude that understands itself as *post-fascist*. Nazi remnants are preserved and new memorials are built that recall the perpetrators and commemorate the victims, just as the anti-fascist tradition proposes. Yet little can be detected of the humble and conscience-stricken spirit that is characteristic of warning memorials and their insistence on self-critical preoccupation, self-indictment, and merciless documentation to counter forgetfulness. In marked contrast, in fact, self-confident and complacent undertones define the memorialization of the alienated past, if not downright triumphalism. To conceptualize this difference, the material expressions of this regained self-confidence can be characterized, loosely following James E. Young (1972), as counter-monuments. Counter-monuments (*Gegendenkmäler*) challenge the traditional idea of national monuments (*Denkmäler*) like warning monuments (*Mahnmale*) by staging a discontinuity with the past, but they postulate a different interpretation of the historical discontinuity. The fascist legacy is invoked not to articulate the imperative of remembering the historical guilt, as warning memorials do, but to witness the present accomplishments. By ways of a quasi-Hegelian dialectic, or so it appears, thesis (fascist past) and antithesis (self-indictment) are superseded by a cathartic synthesis that portrays the German nation as having successfully mastered its own past.

The Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, unveiled in 2005, serves to illustrate this trend. The memorial has been internationally recognized and overall positively evaluated as an outstanding warning memorial that proves Germany's honest admission of national guilt. Following this interpretation, vehement critics have therefore lambasted the memorial as a particularly blatant expression of the anti-fascist stance. In

Walser's (1998) terms, the memorial amounts to the 'monumentalization of ignominy'. However, it really is, I believe, Germany's most remarkable investment in soft power in recent years. The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe consists of 2,711 rectangular stelae (concrete slabs) of up to ten cubic metres that are arranged in a grid pattern to cover nearly five acres of land right in the centre of Berlin. No less colossal than Speer's architecture, it scarcely invites the spectator to reflect quietly about Germany's guilt as a perpetrator nation. Rather, it overwhelms the spectator, indeed constituting what Young considers characteristic of counter-monuments, namely a 'brazen, painfully self-conscious memorial spac[e]' (Young 1992: 271). While the memorial reinstates by architectural means the perpetrator agent that is missing in the name of the memorial (Sion 2010: 246) and thus recalls the responsibility to make the statement that such horrendous crimes must 'never happen again', it also draws attention to an agent that apparently spares neither cost nor effort to come to terms with the fascist legacy. As if to testify that Germany has successfully managed to overcome the Nazi past, the 'place of information' is located underground whereas the visible part of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe is conspicuously framed by the symbols of the reunified Germany, Reichstag Building and Brandenburg Gate. One cannot avoid the impression that the German nation's sense of consciousness of guilt and responsibility is staged more prominently than the guilt and responsibility itself. The fascist legacy, as a point of reference for exerting moral pressure, is appropriated and put into the service of the new Germany. To some extent, perhaps, such counter-monumental architecture allows overcoming a shattered masculinity, as Corinna Tomberger (2010) thinks. Yet more importantly in political terms, the open confession of the cruelties that happened in Germany's name anticipates and undercuts attempts to exploit the disgrace of the old Germany. In fact, much more effectively than the non-ideological strategy of 'drawing a line under the past', flamboyantly staging memorialization efforts in particularly prominent places allows claiming a moral superiority – vis-à-vis the old Germany, of

course but primarily vis-à-vis domestic antagonists and rival nations in international disputes that have not likewise 'faced up' to their past, genocidal or not.

Here about Picture 3

Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin (2005). Copyright Black River Productions, Ltd./Mitch Epstein 2008, courtesy Galerie Thomas Zander, Köln.

Here about Picture 4

Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin (2008). In the background: Reichstag Building and Brandenburg Gate. Photo by courtesy of Sebastian Demuss, 2011.

The counter-monumental culture has also found material expression on the former Nazi Party rally grounds in Nuremberg. In 2001 a spear of glass and steel was thrust into the replica of the Colosseum that Hitler had intended to host NSDAP party congresses. The spear 'mak[es] a deconstructive slice through the building … and so break[s] its monumentality and strong geometry' (Project description quoted from Macdonald 2006b: 20 n. 14). Thus, the inner life of National Socialism is made visible from the outside and visitors are confronted with the new Germany's willingness to learn from history even before they enter the building. The modified transformer station exemplifies another discursive challenge to the long prevailing anti-fascist tradition of memorialization in Germany. It clearly breaks with the humble and self-critical culture of preserving the physical Nazi heritage as a witness to the past. To some extent the transformer station-turned-Burger King restaurant draws upon the non-ideological position's vision of 'amortizing' the burdensome past by putting the building to practical economic use. But

there is no sign that the building will be destroyed in the near future to efface the fascist legacy. Instead, the space is perfected. Moreover, in line with the post-fascist stance, the attempt is being made to use the unwelcome inheritance for one's own benefit. Rather than aiming at mere 'amortization', the National Socialist past is instrumentalized for present purposes, both materially and symbolically: The new German 'self' is grounded in the constitutive outside 'National Socialism' and the remnants of fascism serve as the foundation for its reconstruction.

Exhibiting the spirit of the post-fascist stance, attention is drawn to a physical reminder of the fascist legacy so that the observer is left in no doubt about Germany's achievement of having overcome the temptations of militarist adventures, racism, and chauvinism. Of course, the match is imperfect because the installation of a mundane and commercial structure, as a fast-food outlet is, must trivialize National Socialism. But it is crucial to understand that the trivialization we can witness here diverges significantly from the kind of trivialization that the theorists of economization expect. It does not dilute the historical meaning of the site, rendering it trite or banal. Instead, the building's symbolic amalgamation with a fast-food restaurant subverts the original monument's meaning and compels the spectator to work out the paradox. No less thought-provoking as remembrance–through–documentation, the site now carries the signs of the strategy of *ironic trivialization* that Nuremberg's Head of Cultural Affairs Hermann Glaser propagated in the 1980s (Glaser 1989, cf. Weiß 1992: 172). One of the few examples in which this strategy was implemented is the firebowl from the Zeppelin Grandstand on the Nazi Party rally grounds. The firebowl was removed, painted in gaudy colours, and – under the motto 'where once terror ruled there shall be joy and jolliness' – re-utilized as a paddling pool for children in the area of the adjacent swimming pools (Schmidt 2002: 248).

Final Remarks

The opening of a fast-food outlet in Speer's transformer station constitutes a remarkable case which throws light on the ongoing process of reconstructing German national identity through the demarcating projection of National Socialism. Given the multiple layers of meaning that coalesce in the topographical compound of the erstwhile transformer station, the case defies unambiguous categorization into any established discursive position. And while practical interventions usually exhibit shades of grey rather than being either black or white (Miller-Idriss and Rothenberg 2012: 133-4), this case might be perhaps even more prone to ambiguous interpretation than other examples of memorial culture in post-World War II Germany. Still, the unperturbed re-utilization of Nazi heritage for present purposes clearly testifies to the reclaimed self-confidence of the German nation. Attention is drawn away from the undesirable and indelible heritage itself, and drawn towards the achievement of having successfully overcome the alienated past. Thus, the conversion of the transformer station contributes to the mainstreaming of a German self-understanding that reclaims a place for national pride. At the same time, however, because the symbolic 'othering' of National Socialism is accomplished through commerce and mass culture, rather than through artistic architecture (as is characteristic for the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe or the Documentation Centre in Nuremberg), a partly puzzling, partly moderating, and arguably (self-)ironic dimension is added, which distinguishes this case from other recent material manifestations of the post-fascist re-construction of German identity.

The present investigation certainly lends further credence to the argument that national identity is by no means on the decline despite processes of political de-nationalization and economic globalization (Ariely 2012, Rembold and Carrier 2011). In addition, a doubt is cast on the validity of theories of late-modern space production that emphasize homogenization. Although it would be worth pushing these implications a little

further, I shall concentrate in these final remarks on the legitimacy and attractiveness of the commercial profanation of historically contaminated sites as a counter-monumental memorialization strategy, independently of partisan political considerations in the stricter sense of the term. To some extent an economistic spirit was at work in the discussed case that crowded out historical sensibilities. Nevertheless, in its ability to offer resistance to the meaning and agency of the material heritage of National Socialism and provoke controversy, the conversion of the transformer station into a fast-food restaurant might not be inferior to more conscientiously critical memorialization strategies. Re-utilized as a fast-food restaurant, the physical remnant of National Socialism speaks to people's everyday life. As one customer I talked to put it: 'I come here frequently for lunch and rarely give a thought to the building's history. But if it were another museum instead of a place to eat, I wouldn't come here at all.' Moreover, considering the overall context, the best memorial to the Nazi regime and its victims might not be a single monument at all, nor a coherent memorial culture, but rather a pluralism of memorials. Or, as Young argues, 'instead of a fixed figure for memory, the debate itself – the perpetually unresolved amid ever-changing conditions – might be enshrined' (Young 1992: 270, see also Riera 2006: 399). Finally, the commercializing profanation that characterizes the amalgamation of Speer's transformer station with a fast-food restaurant circumvents many problems that other ways of 'othering' National Socialism face. The Nazi past is not effaced and repressed, as the strategy of 'amortization' tends to do. At the same time, the fascist legacy is not allowed to pocket public funds that could be used for the compensation of the victims of fascism. The building is not allowed to shine in its original splendour, it avoids the wonder of the museum as well as the allure of the ruin. The creole gets by without the need for sobering and forthright documentation – although not the outcome that the National Socialists had actually hoped for, such documentation must still testify to the impact of their undertakings after all. Quite the contrary, the conversion of Hitler's 'word made of stone' into a

multinational fast-food restaurant is certainly something that the architects of the Third Reich did not anticipate: the neon sign with the company name affixed to the front wall enlivens the façade's design; the blue plastic chairs and bright red sunshades outside undermine the daunting violation of the human scale that is so characteristic of Speer's architecture; the playground with its slide infantilizes the setting. The typical fast-food chain interior makes whatever may once have appeared sacred profane, and the place formerly occupied by generators powering the Nazi spectacle is taken over by grill and chip pan. Red flags still fly in the wind in front of the building. But the place of the swastika is taken by a symbol that stands for liberalism and capitalism, perhaps ethnic and religious tolerance, or even Western imperialism. In any case, Americana overbuilds fascist mythology. Precisely because this is so controversial, commercial profanation might facilitate critical reflection on contemporary Germany and its fascist past in a way that other memorialization strategies do not.

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